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# MEMORIES IN TIME OF CRISIS

# Digital Design Interstices

## A Space for Collective Counter-Memories

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### Keywords

Digital Design Interstices, Counter-Memories, Alternative Media, Temporary Information, Collective Memory.

### Abstract

The paper explores the *design interstices* within consolidated media structures. These are spaces *occupied* for unprecedented use in case of emergency or dramatic events. The authors analyze some significant experiences developed on different levels, from initiatives by individual citizens to organizations such as the collective Bellingcat. These alternative uses of media contribute to the creation of what Michel Foucault called *counter-memory*: discourses parallel to the official ones that arise as forms of resistance from people who are marginalized by power.

Overall, the paper provides a detailed and insightful look at the possibilities offered by *digital design interstices* in the creation and preservation of collective memories.

## 1. Introduction

Our field of exploration fits within the constantly shifting plots of communication in digital ecosystems. In these environments, characterized by continuous production and exchange of data within regulated and established structures, it is possible to encounter communicative solutions not previously designed.

It could happen, for example, in the case of an emergency or dramatic event, when the need for fast design responses is fundamental for overcoming it. These situations, however, do not allow normal planning processes. Thus, users and organizations can find new possibilities, or fissures, between one or more digital tools to meet new communicative needs. We called these fissures *digital design interstices*.

Although the term is derived from city studies, it can also be traced in the fields of design and media theory. According to Mubi Brighenti (2013), the urban interstice, also called *in-between*, is a free space surrounded by other more institution-alized spaces that allow for the emergence of unforeseeable combinations and encounters. Similarly, de Certeau (2010) uses the term *tactics*, the social practice enacted by individuals who, while moving within predetermined spaces, follow alternative, different needs.

In the design field, the term *interstice* finds much in common with *diffuse design*: a design that solves everyday problems through the use and reinterpretation of the means at hand (Manzini, 2015). The same intuitive character also belongs to Bassi's (2007) concept of *anonymous design* and Scodeller's (2017) *spontaneous design*.

In the field of media theory, *digital design interstices* may fall under the broader definition of alternative media, which is essential both for their content and ability to generate non-standard methods of creation, production, and distribution (Atton, 2002). Along the same lines, Downing (2001) describes *radical media* as tools capable of expressing an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives. Against this backdrop, this study set out to investigate the possibilities offered by *digital design interstices* in the production of alternative narratives, approaching the concept of counter-memory introduced by Foucault (1977).

This paper has been divided into three sections. The first one contextualizes the framework of *digital design interstice* and provides the background of the relationship between collective memory and digital communication tools (Halbwachs, 1949; Esposito, 2001). The following two sections analyze two groups of case studies. The first group analyzes the use of *digital design interstices* in the creation process of collective memories, while the second focuses on the preservation of collective memories.

## 2. Digital Design Interstices, Collective and Counter-Memories

The term interstice (or interstitial space) can be found mainly in the literature on urban spaces and indicates the in-between, leftover spaces, and the errors of urban design found within the city. These are spaces with less institutional power, often referred to as *in-betweens*, and less coveted since they have less economic value (Mubi Brighenti, 2013). In recent years, however, urban interstices have been attracting interest as active components of urban space as well as places of possibility.

These places of possibility can be likened to the concept of *tactics* found in Michel de Certeau's book *The Invention of the Everyday*. In his survey, the anthropologist classifies social behavior into two categories: *strategies* and *tactics*. While institutions are in the business of putting in place *strategies* to achieve goals that conform with the reproduction of a given system (the city, for example), the *common* human being, who moves within the same system, invents his every day through *tactics* of resistance, which follow different needs and attitudes.

Approaching the digital design field, the interstitial spaces and tactics of resistance described by de Certeau can be identified in that strand that, over the years, has been concerned with the study of uses, alternative design approaches, and everyday problem-solving by ordinary or anonymous users.

An example of this is *Diffuse design*, a term coined by Ezio Manzini (2015) that indicates the design instinct that unites everyone to achieve personal or common goals, which differs from expert design that belongs to those trained as designers. In his book *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, Manzini describes the possible interaction between designers and non-designers to achieve social change. However, the focus on diffuse design has also been an object of study for other authors relevant to the Italian design field. Some examples include Alberto Bassi (2007) with the book *Design anonimo in Italia. Oggetti comuni e progetto incognito* [*Anonymous design in Italy. Common objects and unknown project*, AT], which catalogs a series of everyday objects with excellent design characteristics but without a “signature”, and later Dario Scodeller (2017) with

the book *Design Spontaneo. Tracce di progettualità diffusa* [*Spontaneous Design. Traces of diffused design*, AT]. From the combination of these references comes the term *digital design interstices*, which refers specifically to the digital world.

An online user, just as happens offline, turns into a designer, especially in times of need. The search for solutions, as in the case of de Certeau's common human being, who seeks his *tactics* to move within system *strategies*, is characterized by very short time frames and the use of the means available at that moment. Within the digital interstices, virtual cracks within which ordinary users engineer themselves to communicate by dodging technological constraints, it is possible to find alternative narratives to the dominant ones and, thus, the production of new collective memories.

To better understand the role of *digital design interstices* as spaces for collective counter-memories, it is helpful to introduce the studies about collective memory.

The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (2001) argued that collective memory is shaped by the social groups to which an individual belongs. He saw memory as a social phenomenon, something that is created and maintained by groups of people. In his vision, collective memory differs from other types of memories<sup>1</sup> (cultural, historical, and individual) precisely because it arises and

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1 To define his concept of collective memory, Halbwachs draws on Durkheim's concept of *collective representation*: memory is never just individual, because it is formed within society and recalled through social interaction. Recollection is not only stored in memory, it is not only an intact image of the past, but it is a clue, a trace of the past that must be interpreted in the present to give meaning to the present itself.

evolves through social interaction (Namer, 2001). Elena Esposito (2001) extends Halbwachs's work to the digital realm, arguing that digital communication tools can be used to create and maintain collective memories. In the digital world, social interaction is often dislocated in space and time. Considering the ephemeral nature and the large amount of digital information produced daily, it is inefficient to use the same cataloging criteria as archives and libraries in digital ecosystems. What is needed, rather, are systems to keep digital information always available: an “artificial perpetual use that allows for continuous re-reading and regeneration of information” (Esposito, 2001).

Before digital, the representative devices for preserving collective memory were books, libraries, and archives. The reader's action activates such devices: “The data contained in books and libraries are ‘virtual information’, which becomes real only when we search for it and are surprised by it” (Esposito, 2001, p. 224). By placing itself at a higher level than the content, the catalog becomes a tool that allows them to be ordered, recombined, and reused at different times with different intentions. These operations allow the connections between content and, thus, the possibility of producing non-predetermined information. Although a real *information overload*<sup>2</sup> characterizes today's digital world, the spread of digital technologies has, in some cases, facilitated the creation of connections between content. This potential, attributed as seen above to the catalog, added to the active role of

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2 The term, popularized by Alvin Toffler in early 1970s, indicates the difficulty of being able to process too much information, especially if it is complex and contradictory.

users, can give rise to non-predetermined information and constitute a collective memory for the future.

The *Mnemonic.org* project (Fig. 1) is a great example focused on developing “accessible and long-term preservation strategies and open-source tools to archive at-risk digital information valuable to journalists and human rights defenders” (Mnemonic, n.d). Founded in 2014, the NGO has established four stand-alone public and explorable archives, preserving vulnerable digital information from Syria, Sudan, Yemen, and Ukraine. They hold over ten million documents uploaded online by citizens. They offer a fast response in collecting, verifying, preserving, and investigating digital information documenting human rights violations. Mnemonic helps preserve and build a digital memory through searchable verified databases to provide potential legal evidence. The collection made by Mnemonic leaves space for a different vision from the dominant one promoted by institutions and classical journalism. This vision comes close to the concept of counter-memory, often used by Foucault (1977) to define the processes of memory construction in socio-political contexts. Counter-memory is a form of resistance exercise, especially for those marginalized by power, and arises in opposition to the dominant discourse:

The dominant discourse of memory for Foucault typically forms a “top-down” perspective. The dominant discourse is suppressive and tends to subject all. Counter-memory, however, highlights the reversed perspective of “bottom-up”, representing the process during which different groups and individuals try to influence the existing knowledge. (Radzobe, 2019, p. 94)



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## The video shows people allegedly injured while being washed with water by people wearing protective clothing and masks who believed to be members of the Civil Defense. The video was filmed at night in a street.

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✓verified observation: DM160415  
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0:00 / 1:28

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link

**Incident:**  
DM160415

**summary**  
The video shows people allegedly injured while being washed with water by people wearing protective clothing and masks who believed to be members of the Civil Defense. The video was filmed at night in a street.

**date of occurrence**  
04/16/2015

**location**  
IDLIB · IDLIB

**collections:**  
chemical dataset



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**Figure 1.** Mnemonic. A page from the Syrian archive, a large container that stores data on human rights violations in Syria. Retrieved from syrianarchive.org, 2022.

In the following sections, we observe how *digital design interstices* can become occupiable spaces in emergency situations for the creation of alternative narratives that, when adequately verified, organized, and aggregated, become key elements for the preservation of collective counter-memories.

### 3. Public Engagement and Self-Managed Practices: the Creation of Collective Counter-Memories

The user's role has recently changed from a passive consumer to an active multimedia content creator. With the spread of smartphones and portable devices, ordinary citizens, individuals, or groups interested in specific problems or events have the opportunity to become active subjects of journalism (*concerned citizens*). Consumers, now *prosumers*, become an active element of the narrative (Fuchs, 2010). This documentation practice is often a fundamental part of protest movements. Through the analysis of two case studies, *Public reviews on Google Maps and TripAdvisor for war news sharing* and *Air-drop's file sharing for the organization of protest movements*, we will observe how the creative use of some communication tools can support the informing of citizens involved in dramatic events that have taken place in two particular contexts. Each case study provides an overview of the event and analyzes, in particular, the ways in which *digital design interstices* are occupied to create collective counter-memories.

#### 3.1. Public Reviews on Google Maps and TripAdvisor for War News Sharing

The first case study is the outcome created to circumvent Russia's censorship during the Ukraine invasion, which began on

February 24, 2022. It was carried out by the famous hacktivist group *Anonymous* through the use of public reviews on Google Maps and TripAdvisor (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Anonymous. Short instructions for sharing war information on Google Maps. Retrieved from Twitter, February 2022 (screenshot by the authors).

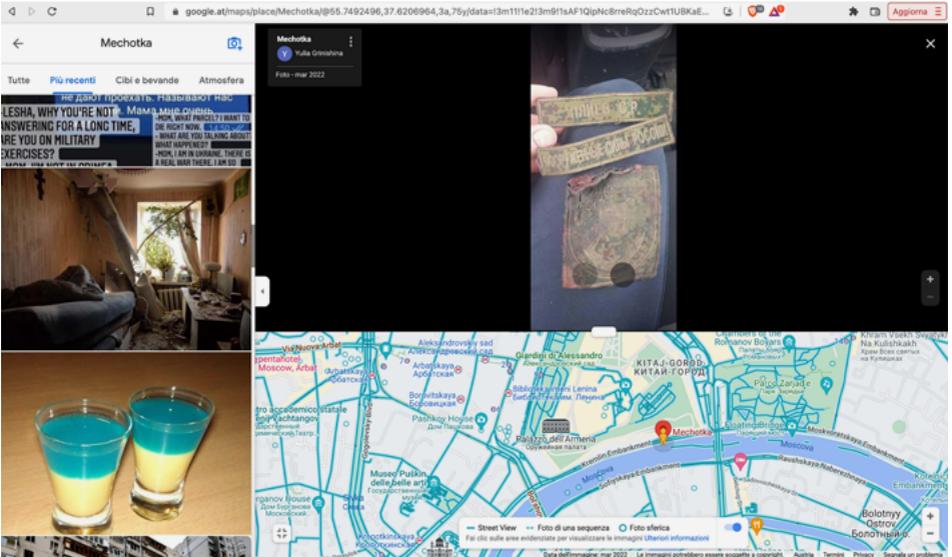
*Anonymous*, founded in 2003, is a decentralized movement that works anonymously online to achieve a common goal, often involving hacking or other digital subversive activity. They are best known for different cyber-attacks against various companies and government institutions in the fight against injustice and powerful forces spread.

During the first days of the Russian invasion, they found a simple and effective way to inform the Russian population, subject to strong censorship. The initiative comes from the Twitter user @Konrad03249040, who, through a post on Twitter, invites other users to search for commercial activity on Google

Maps or TripAdvisor in Russian territory. Then, users write a public review to describe and show, using images, the destruction caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This fast action allowed the Russian population to access information the government would otherwise have censored.

The request was widely accepted until, after a few days and thousands of reviews, a Google spokesperson made an announcement through the CNET website on March 2, 2022:

Due to a recent increase in contributed content on Google Maps related to the war in Ukraine, we've put additional protections in place to monitor and prevent content that violates our policies for Maps, including temporarily blocking new reviews, photos, and videos in the region. (Collins, 2022)



**Figure 3.** Google Maps. An example of a public review showing images of war. Retrieved from Google, March 2022 (screenshot by the authors).

Although active for only a few days, this communication system proved helpful in promptly informing Russian citizens of what was happening inside Ukrainian borders. What remains today as evidence of these actions are online and printed articles and a series of screenshots (Fig. 3).

### **3.2. Airdrop's file sharing for the organization of protest movements**

In the second case study, the creation of collective counter-memory comes from Hong Kong and occurs through the use of Airdrop, normally used for file sharing, here used for internal organization and dissemination of the reasons for the protests. It will be highlighted how technology facilitated collective action and self-organization of the movement.

The largest mobilization in Hong Kong's history took place in 2019. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, Carrie Lam, of the pro-Beijing party and Chief of the executive, proposed a bill that would allow extradition from Hong Kong (with an independent judiciary system) to mainland China (with a judiciary system subject to the Communist Party). The population of Hong Kong harshly criticized the bill because its promulgation would have created a judicial precedent for the Chinese judiciary system to replace the legal system of Hong Kong (Sala, 2022).

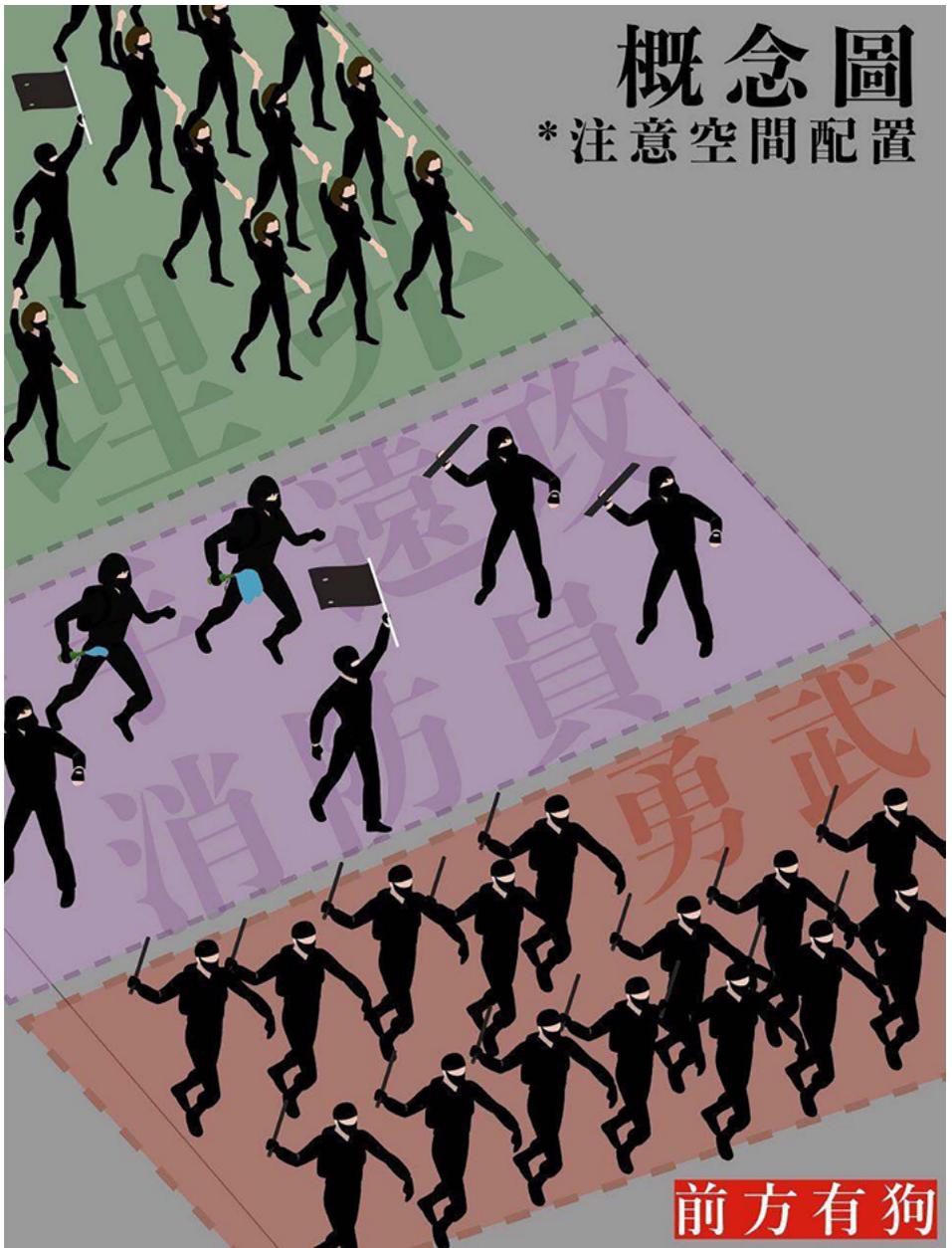
The first peaceful demonstrations of June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, led by the Frontline Civil Rights Human Rights activist group, took nearly two million people to the streets of Hong Kong.

What is most interesting about this protest is the self-organization of the movement and the tools used to carry out collective protest actions.

Some online messaging platforms (WeChat, Telegram, Signal) are well-known and have already been used in various protest forms by previous movements. This is not the case for AirDrop. At the end of June 2019, the demonstrators began using AirDrop technology to anonymously send informational documents to passengers on public transport and in popular, busy places in Hong Kong.



**Figure 4.** Dummies Guide to confronting and war strategies by frontline protesters in Hong Kong. Retrieved by dimsumdaily.hk, June 2022.



The shared documents aim to inform as many people as possible about the reasons for the protest and how the movement was organized. The use of social media, furthermore, was instrumental in organizing the protests and sharing information about the movement with the world. The movement ultimately succeeded in forcing the city's government to withdraw the proposed extradition bill. Overall, the Hong Kong protests were a success in that they achieved their primary goal of stopping the extradition bill (Figs. 4 & 5).

In conclusion, the two cases studied show that, in the face of an emergency, some citizens feel the need to create and share information using available technologies to allow others to be aware of what is happening and, if necessary, to act. The communication systems built take advantage, creatively, of existing and available technologies. Data and content creation can be considered useful elements in creating a new collective counter-memory. This memory complements official narratives from institutions and official sources and offers a closer view of the direct experience of citizens.

#### **4. From Self-Managed Practices to Organizations: the Preservation of Collective Counter-Memories**

The case study analyzed in this section provides a more detailed example of the collective Bellingcat, a group of investigative journalists specializing in fact-checking and open-source intelligence. The collective exploits the content created by citizens and processes it by organizing, cross-referencing, and verifying it to create evidence. This example shows how, through these time-consuming and laborious processes, collective counter-memories created by users can be maintained.

#### 4.1. Bellingcat. An Intelligence Agency for the People

The international collective Bellingcat is proving to be one of the benchmarks for online open-source investigation in recent years. Investigative materials are collected from social media, image and video-sharing platforms, and mapping tools to build evidence in cases of conflict or human rights violations. The numerous contents, mainly photos and videos, are uploaded online by citizens who experience or witness firsthand conflicts and crimes. Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok are the main platforms used, and together they form a fragmented scenario of information, generating a multitude of viewpoints around the same event. When taken individually, this content provides a partial, often confusing, and sometimes too brief view of the event to be considered real evidence. While this fragmented content fuels the concept of information overload, online open-source investigation succeeds by overlaying and integrating data with each other to restore validity, understood as reliability and completeness. Eliot Higgins, founder of Bellingcat, in his book *We are Bellingcat: An intelligence agency for the people*, stresses the importance of this aspect:

I never attempted to tell a complete story, as a news reporter strives to do [...]. My focus became valid information. I cited all sources, making it clear where information derived from [...]. This approach developed into what would become a guiding principle at Bellingcat: the response to information chaos is transparency. (Higgins 2021, p. 13)

The online investigative community, formed today by people located all over the world, is primarily concerned with col-

lecting and archiving content. Each video/image is analyzed primarily using freely available online services and software. These are everyday tools that become, in this context, valuable allies in the validation of information and its subsequent integration. To name a few: Google Maps for geolocation; SunCalc, an application used by photographers to measure shadows, used by investigators to trace back the time of the event; and dozens of other software/applications to perform forensic analysis on images to rule out digital manipulation, for downloading content, maps for flight tracker, sites that can detect bots, services for protection from online tracking, etc. These tools are organized and available in the Bellingcat Online Investigation Toolkit to anyone who would like to join the community. This powerful collective tool can combat misinformation and preserve the evidentiary element for future judicial and historical analysis (Higgins, 2021).

Among other things, open-source investigators have so far managed geolocated battle zones in Libya, identified weapons around Syria, and recently uncovered a clandestine international arms-smuggling operation. During Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, the collective mobilized very quickly to map incidents of civilian harm.

In the central Ukrainian city of Uman, a bloodied body lies lifeless in the street. It's February 24, and Russia's invasion of its neighbour has just begun. Debris is strewn across the road, and the windows of nearby cars have been shattered.

CCTV footage from a nearby shop shows a huge explosion took place here at just after 7 am local time.

A crater, clearly visible in social media video, appears to confirm a rocket was the cause of the explosion, taking the life of the individual lying motionless nearby. (Bellingcat, 2022)

Thus began the description of the latest investigation project carried out by Bellingcat with the support of the Global Authentication Project collective.<sup>3</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been called, by *The New Yorker*, the first *TikTok War* (Chayka, 2022) because of how it is documented, which was strongly linked to a social media aesthetic and the large amount of content uploaded online by users.

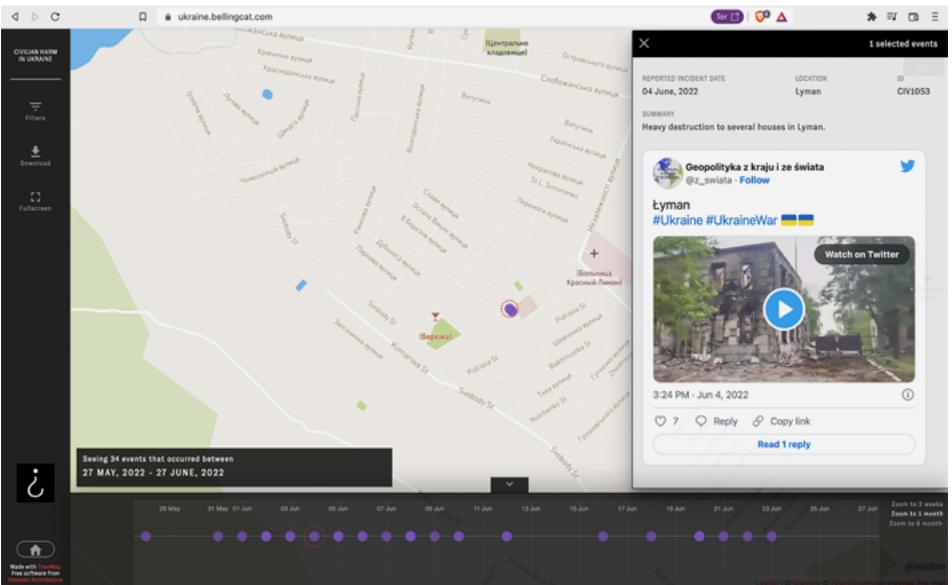
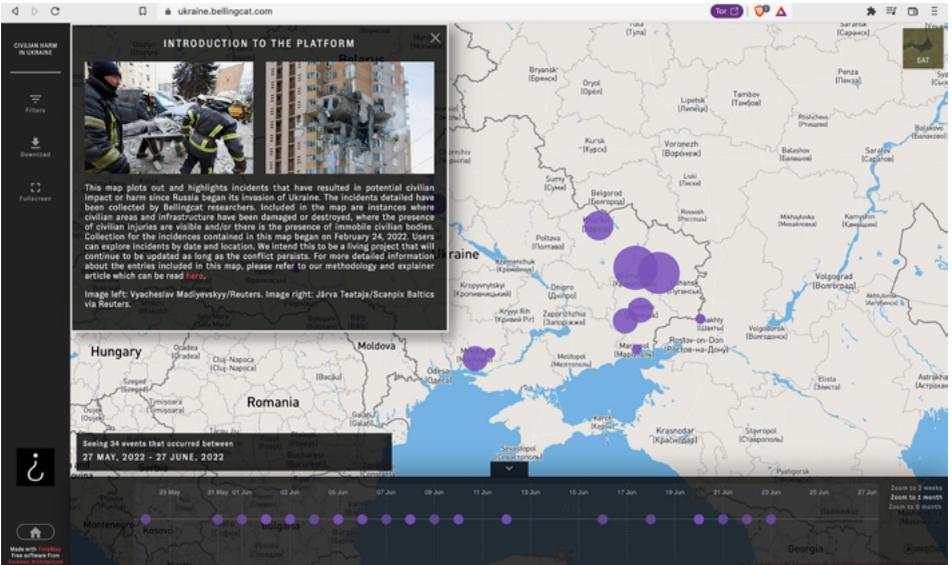
The methodology of the observed research, whose output is the creation of a constantly updated map, follows precise and orderly steps. First, all the testimonies collected online (Instagram posts, Tweets, Youtube videos) show from different perspectives civilian harm done during the period of the conflict, sometimes at the time of the impact and others at times after the event, are carefully verified and archived.

Then, due to their location in both geography and time on Ukrainian territory, the testimonies are placed on a map, available online, based on the open-source *TimeMap*<sup>4</sup> software. The map is navigable in both space and time: a specific day or a range of time can be selected from the timeline.

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3 The Global Authentication Project is a group of volunteers who verify sources and place, geographically and temporally, content founded online.

4 The open-source software, developed by the research group Forensic Architecture, allows to visualize geospatial events in an interactive platform.



Figures 6 & 7. Database collecting incidents in Ukraine that have resulted in potential harm to civilians. Retrieved from Bellingcat.com, June 2022.

By clicking one of the points on the map, it is possible to view one or more testimonies related to a particular civil damage. Testimonials are links to original sources, ephemeral by design: if a user decides to remove their content from the network or if it is censored, it will disappear from the map as well, although the objective description (summary) will remain (Figs. 6 & 7).

The testimonies are subjective visions that do not have the purpose of what Susan Sontag calls a “hunt for the most dramatic images [...] in a culture in which shock has become one of the most important criteria of value and incentives for consumption” (Sontag, 2021, p. 21), nor even an aesthetic quest, but only provide fragments of direct experiences. Through Bellingcat’s intervention, they become an objective proof of the facts and a way to create knowledge that will also be available in the future: they represent an example of how to preserve collective counter-memories.

## 5. Conclusions

This study is important in understanding the role of *design interstices* in digital media. The case studies presented offer a scenario that starts from relying on the now-assimilated simple act of sharing content in real-time and arrives at the systematic organization of that content to cope with emergencies or crises. Observing the narratives that arise from such possibilities makes it possible to discover a range of crucial contemporary phenomena in new ways.

An interesting question posed by Hanna Arendt (1992): “how to identify in the present what past is handed over to us for the future?” relates to what Withers writes in his review of

Higgins' book: "In the future historians are likely to spend less time in physical archives and more time analyzing online content" (Withers, 2022). The explorations of an example like Bellingcat offer a reflection on possible reconstructions of contemporary events to be studied in the future. Moreover, these findings suggest that *digital design interstices* offer a unique opportunity for the creation and preservation of counter-narratives that can challenge dominant ones and offer new perspectives on the present through verified, bottom-up observations.

The research finally emphasizes the importance of the combination of individual user engagement and the design of organized systems. The creation of memories and their preservation through the careful design of the organization and verification of content can turn what is usually referred to as digital pollution into accessible and collective counter-memories and could be a fruitful area for further research work.

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IV

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She is a Material Social Futures PhD student in the Department of Languages and Cultures and the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts at Lancaster University. Her interdisciplinary work is supervised by Dr Emily Spiers and Prof. Paul Coulton. Her PhD explores the future of infinite data storage and scenarios in which we will be able to store everything. She is interested in how human memory metaphors shape computer memory's design and vice versa.

Her research can be generally described as Speculative Design, through which she strives to understand how people and technology (will) interact with each other.

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Since 2018 he is a Research Fellow at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Faculty of Design and Art.

He is co-founder and co-director of Krisis Publishing, an independent publishing and curatorial platform focusing on media culture, politics of representation and social research.

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Sabrina Melis is an Italian artist and designer. She is currently a PhD student at the Department of Architecture, Urban Planning and Design of Alghero. In her practice she intertwines artistic and scientific research focused on the exploration of possible approaches to find a way to integrate complex information avoiding the problem of oversimplification.

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His design research projects, presented in many academic conferences and events such as TEDx and Visualized.io received the Data Journalism Award 2015, the European Design Award 2016 and 2017.

Moretti has also been a jury member at the World Press Photo 2017-18 (Immersive journalism category) and one of the 100 ambassadors of Italian design in the world 2018, named by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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As a freelance he works in the Interaction Design, Interactive Design and Music field, focusing his personal research on multi-sensory interface, user experience in digital environments and cross-platform devices.

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She is co-founder of Studio Taller, a graphic and communication design studio based in Rimini. Since 2018 she has been collaborating as a volunteer and professional consultant for "Il Palloncino Rosso", a social promotion association with which she works on projects for social innovation and cultural promotion, creating exhibitions of regional interest, publications and participatory projects related to the conscious reuse of abandoned buildings.

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Mathieu Salzmann's research lies at the intersection of machine learning and visual recognition. He has published over 100 articles at top-tier peer-reviewed machine learning and computer vision venues, including CVPR, ICCV, NeurIPS, ICML, IEEE TPAMI, IEEE TNN-LS.

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Visual Communication and Graphic designer, Elettra Scotucci is in the second year of her PhD in Design at Sapienza University of Rome. Her main research topics are Typography and Graphic Design History, and the relationship between Design and New Craft in the field of the contemporary production of display typefaces for letterpress printing. Together with his Ph.D. colleague Andrea Vendetti, she runs a letterpress studio in Rome, Slab, which is also a key spot for historical research, experimentation, and educational projects.

Currently she is Teaching Assistant in the Type Design course, both in the English and Italian curricula, at the DCVM master's degree, at Sapienza.

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He has been consultant of the Italian Minister for Technological Innovation and Digitization and of the Team for Digital Transformation at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers for the "Digital Republic" project. He was a member of the Steering Committee of the Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale (Agid) for the definition of the "Design Guidelines for the PA websites".

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After graduating from Sapienza University of Rome with a thesis on the clandestine presses of the Italian Resistance, and after a study period at ENSAD in Paris, he graduated from ISIA in Urbino with a thesis on the historiography of graphic design. He is in the final year of his PhD in Design at Sapienza University of Rome: his research consists of a survey on primary sources for the study of the history of wooden typefaces in Italy.

He teaches Graphic design and History of printing and publishing at Rufa. He works as a graphic designer with archives and associations and is the co-founder of Slab, a letterpress studio in Rome. Slab is a workshop where teaching and research are carried out to safeguard Italian typographic culture, and where workshops, exhibitions and conferences are held. Andrea Vendetti has been an AIAP national councillor since 2022.

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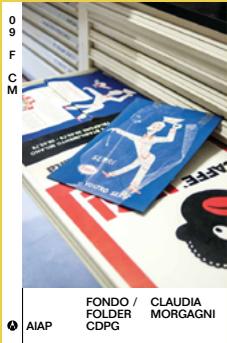
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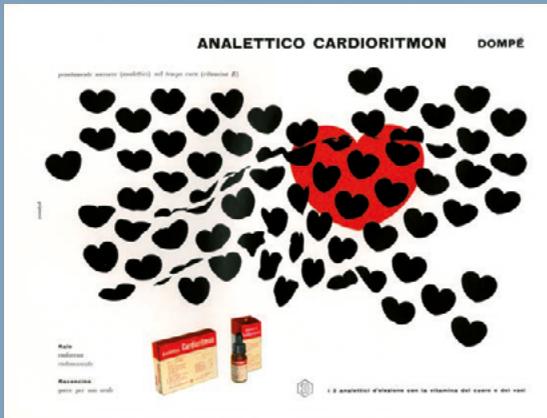
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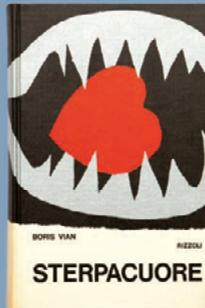
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